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With General Micawber to Managua

President Reagan has finally dropped one shoe by conceding American involvement in a covert war against the leftist rulers of Nicaragua. It is perfectly legal, Mr. Reagan insists, though Congress has yet to endorse that view. And in the opinion of his United Nations Ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, the American cause is eminently moral — an assertion that should not be glibly dismissed.

But assuming morality and even legality, can the secret war succeed? For that matter, what is "success"? Does the Administration really expect a small émigré army to alter or topple the Marxist regime in Managua? If so, why are the regime's native opponents appalled by the secret war? And what are the risks of humiliation if this cloudy venture ends like the Suez War or the Bay of Pigs?

One need not admire the Sandinists to ask whether the true author of this muddle is Mr. Micawber, with his sublime faith that something better will somehow come along.

The laws pertaining to covert wars are not absolute prohibitions. For all its justifiable concern about America's war-making power, Congress refused four months ago to veto the appropriations that buy military aid for Nicaraguan rebels. It adopted a narrower restriction instead, barring such aid for the purpose of igniting war between Honduras and Nicaragua, or overthrowing the Managua Government.

The core of the President's legal case is that he is abiding by this unwelcome restriction. The operation's only purposes, he contends, are to pressure Nicaragua to reform itself and to interdict its smuggling of weapons to El Salvador. But these limited

purposes are hardly shared by our émigré partners in insurrectional activity. They see the Sandinists as irredeemably totalitarian and want the operation to ignite a new revolution.

The Administration's moral argument is more compelling. If the Nicaraguan regime is now lost to despotism, it is not necessarily wrong to encourage its enemies. The Nicaraguans, including Sandinistas, who opposed the Somoza dynasty saw nothing immoral in demanding that Washington deny arms to the dictator and otherwise assist in his overthrow.

The holes in the Administration's case are practical. Its secret army is big enough to arouse nationalist fury, but too small to overcome well-armed revolutionaries. None of the decent democrats in the insurgent leadership can claim a real following inside Nicaragua. And the former Somoza National Guardsmen in its officer corps provide the perfect foil for Sandinist propaganda and resistance.

"I can't understand a thing," says Edén Pastora, a former Sandinist minister now among the rebels. "The Sandinists do everything possible to be overthrown, and the C.I.A. does everything possible to keep them in power." Siding with Mr. Pastora are two of the most prominent democratic exiles, Alfonso Robelo Callejas and Arturo Cruz.

The perverse result of this Micawber war is to divide the democrats who oppose the Sandinists, to harden Managua in its intransigence and to give a revolutionary regime a unifying gift. The Administration needs a strategy that is not only moral and legal but also persuasively wise.